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Horizontal in Washington

Washington, D.C., is a city of hustlers and manipulators, full of pitfalls for the journalist, and covered by some of the most experienced reporters in the U.S. It stands to reason that the newspaper correspondent conceded by his colleagues to be Washington's all-round best would be cynical and a bit smug. He isn't. The *Chicago Daily News's* Peter Lisagor, 55, has made his mark by 20 years of hard work and humor, and if he has scooped every competitor and pulled every beard in the capital, he remains the most popular newsman in town.

Laughter is Lisagor's calling card. He has stepped on Khrushchev's foot, fallen asleep in the Taj Mahal and walked head-on into a lamp-post (with bloody consequences) while recording the words of Lyndon Johnson. He tells terrible jokes and laughs so hard at them that everyone laughs with him. Still, no member of the press corps makes the mistake of writing off "Old Pete" as a buffoon. They all laughed when he foiled security by slipping his rented car, crudely lettered STATE DEPARTMENT 1-A, into a key position in Khrushchev's 1959 motorcade through Des Moines, but the joke was on them. It usually is.

Whispers with J.F.K. The lighthearted Lisagor is admired as a great generalist in a field where specialists are taking over. As chief of the *News's* five-member bureau, he practices what he calls "horizontal" journalism—he and his reporters follow their stories wherever they lead rather than sticking to narrow beats, as they might at a large "vertical" bureau. Pete himself covers the White House, foreign policy, Washington politics and whatever captures his fancy. He is reputed to have the widest range of true friends in the Government's employ of any correspondent in D.C. L.B.J. has called him "brilliant." To the consternation of Lisagor's colleagues, John Kennedy used to call him aside for lengthy whispered consultations. J.F.K., a fellow sufferer, was actually asking about Pete's bad back. "I always told the other reporters it was a privileged conversation about Berlin or Cuba or the cold war," Lisagor recalls gleefully, "and that I couldn't divulge any part of it."

Lisagor modestly attributes his popularity to the fact that he works for a provincial paper. None of his sources, he claims, ever see what he writes. But being a "busher" in the bailiwick of the Eastern press

backs. Lippmann or Reston could get a Cabinet member by phone, but Lisagor once waited weeks trying to see John Foster Dulles. He got an interview immediately when, on the strength of a *New York Times* Sunday Magazine assignment, he identified himself as Mr. Lisagor for the *Times*.

On another occasion, the wire services entirely ignored one of his scoops—the discovery that President Syngman Rhee had refused the offer of Indian troops at the height of the Korean War—until he leaked it to the *New York Herald Tribune*. By 1966, when he beat everyone with the first authentic ac-



PETER LISAGOR

Shooting out windows on both sides.

count of the Jackie Kennedy-William Manchester squabble, A.P. and U.P.I. were finally paying attention.

Ron's Bad News. Outside the profession, much of Lisagor's recognition and prestige is due to his appearances on television, which he pretends to disparage. "I belong to the dirty-fingernail set," he boasts. "Those who work with pencil and notebook, as opposed to the folk heroes on TV. I'm a working stiff, a shoe-leather man." He is embarrassed when little girls recognize him and ask for his autograph. Nevertheless, he does a weekly report for NET and is the most frequent guest journalist on NBC's *Meet the Press*, a program that displays Lisagor's most conspicuous talent: he is far and away the most skillful interrogator in the business. On TV, at press conferences, and at the now-famous breakfasts run by Godfrey Sperling of the *Christian Science Monitor*, he breaks through the reserve of of-

sight and irreverence of his questions. "Ron's Bad News," he asked an evasive Daniel P. Moynihan, "how does it feel to be the house liberal?" Lisagor had used the approach before. "If you were Secretary of State," he asked Johnson Adviser McGeorge Bundy several years ago, "would you want a McGeorge Bundy in the White House?" And when Nixon Press Secretary Ron Ziegler began a song and dance about how General Lewis Hershey had not actually been canned as Selective Service director but promoted to a higher advisory post, Lisagor stopped the nonsense and broke up the house by asking quietly: "How did he take the bad news, Ron?"

Shorn of Britches. Those fortunate enough to catch Lisagor in print (his features and weekend columns are syndicated in 90 cities but seldom appear in D.C. or New York) find Pete hanging on no ideological peg. An apolitical anomaly in a highly partisan town, he is praised by Bill Buckley's *National Review* and quoted by the liberal *New Republic*. "An old editor once told me to walk down the middle of the street and shoot windows out on both sides," he says. "I guess that's about what I try to do." He will agonize for hours over his lead. One colorful effort dramatized L.B.J.'s technique of silencing the G.O.P. by stealing its issues: "There is no other word for it—the Republicans have been held up in broad daylight by a daring political desperado from Texas. Lyndon B. Johnson has shorn them of their britches, in the patois of the Pedernales."

Pete Lisagor's "plain folks" pose is an honest one. He was a 14-year-old orphan when he went to Chicago from the West Virginia coal fields in 1930. He played pro baseball "for \$65 a month and hamburgers" in Iowa, until he saved enough money to go to the University of Michigan. With time out for the Army and a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard, he has worked for the *News* almost continually since 1939. In Washington, Old Pete never flaunts his unique eminence, but he obviously enjoys it. When a friend called to ask if a big story had been leaked to him—he had a 24-hour beat on it—he chuckled comfortably and replied: "They don't leak stories to me. I'm just a barefoot boy from over the mountains."